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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TAIPEI 001159

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: SUPPORT FOR PRESIDENT MA YING-JEU DROPS IN PUBLIC  
OPINION POLLS

Classified By: AIT Director Stephen M. Young,  
Reasons: 1.4 (b/d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Since the inauguration on May 20, President Ma's polling numbers have plummeted in reaction to economic disappointment and early missteps by him and his administration. Public opinion surveys conducted by various polling organizations in mid-July consistently show Ma's approval rating dropping to under 40 percent, with more people now dissatisfied than satisfied with his performance. The one bright spot for Ma is that the public approves his policies on further opening cross-Strait economic ties. Ma's problems, which reflect an inability to deliver on his exaggerated campaign promises to produce a dramatic improvement in the economy, could affect the KMT's performance in the 2009 local elections. However, prospects for Ma and the KMT will improve if over time people begin to feel better about their economic situation. End Summary.

Downward Spiral  
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¶2. (C) Since his inauguration on May 20, President Ma Ying-jeou's polling numbers have suffered a double-digit decline, largely as a result of economic problems and early missteps by him and his administration. Public opinion surveys conducted by various polling organizations in mid-June and mid-July consistently show a trend of growing dissatisfaction with the performance of Ma and his administration. All available polls from mid-July show there are now more people dissatisfied than satisfied with their president's performance.

¶3. (C) Global Views Monthly (GVM) Polling Center Director Tai Li-an, a leading pollster, told AIT that his mid-June survey marked the first time in ten years that his polls have shown disapproval of Ma's performance exceeding approval. According to GVM's monthly polls, satisfaction with Ma declined from 58 to 38 to 27 percent during the period May - June - July, while dissatisfaction with Ma grew from 12 to 46 to 60 percent in the same timeframe. Independent voters, who overwhelmingly voted for Ma, are the most volatile group, Tai noted, with approximately 60 percent of this largely urban, professional segment not approving of Ma's performance over the past two months. Polls by other organizations all show the same trend as GVM, though not quite so dramatic a drop.

¶4. (C) Despite Ma's low performance rating, Tai noted, the

public's trust in their president remains relatively high. Satisfaction, Tai explained, is a shorter term measure that fluctuates widely over time. On the other hand, trust, which is more important for a politician, changes more slowly but is harder to regain once lost. Now, even Ma's trust figures are beginning to show some erosion. From June to July trust in the president dropped seven percentage points to 50 percent.

15. (C) Tai and other pollsters attribute the recent decline in Ma's support levels primarily to economic problems arising out of the global economic downturn rather than to any particular failure of the Ma administration. TVBS Polling Center Director Wang Yeh-ting told AIT he was surprised by the July decline in Ma's polling numbers because Ma had become more "proactive" and engaged in government affairs and has not made major personal or character-related mistakes. Wang suggested that inflation and other economic problems may have a magnified effect on Ma's approval ratings because many voters had unrealistic expectations, based on campaign rhetoric, that the KMT would quickly produce a dramatic improvement in the economy.

#### Turning the Numbers Around

16. (C) Tai and Wang told AIT that Ma's numbers may be bottoming out, but building upward momentum will probably require an improvement in how people view their economic situation. Absent a clear economic upturn, Tai argued, there is little Ma can do immediately to boost his support.

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Moreover, Ma's overcautiousness will limit what he can do. According to Tai, Ma pays close attention to polling numbers and will avoid doing anything that is politically "too risky" while his support is low. Wang, on the other hand, suggested that Ma's increased public activities and improved post-typhoon relief work would help stabilize his numbers and could set the groundwork for gradual recovery. Taipei City official Emile Sheng, another polling expert, offered that it was good Ma has hit bottom at the beginning of his term, since he can only go upward from here on.

#### Troubles Ahead?

17. (C) According to Tai, the next six months will be crucial for Ma. If the economy continues to slow and commodity prices rise, Ma and the KMT will face difficulties going into 2009 local elections. Tai doubted that campaigning by Ma would help KMT candidates win local elections in 2009 as happened in 2005, when Ma's efforts produced an overall landslide victory for the KMT. Fortunately for the KMT, the more critical legislative and presidential elections will not take place until 2011-12, so Ma has plenty of time to improve his performance.

18. (C) At this point, the bright spot for Ma is cross-Straits policy, where according to some polls over 50 percent of respondents support the resumption of cross-Straits dialogue and enhanced economic opportunities. Tai and others, however, warn that even here Ma could run into trouble if the numbers of Chinese tourists continue to lag and if people see no direct benefits accruing to themselves from the cross-Straits liberalization policies.

#### Comment

19. (C) Ma's low numbers reflect an inability to deliver on his unrealistic economic campaign promises, the global economic downturn, and some early missteps, including having the cabinet rather than himself deal with crises. Although the "honeymoon" period for Ma was over before it began, his support could begin to recover once external economic

conditions improve and the public lowers its expectations.  
In the meantime, Ma will probably try to assume a more  
pro-active leadership role, work on plans to stimulate the  
economy, and avoid domestically controversial decisions,  
which could affect his approach to certain U.S.-Taiwan  
issues, such as opening the market to all U.S. beef products.  
YOUNG